Easter

The English term, according to the Ven. Bede (De temporum ratione, I, v), relates to Estre, a Teutonic goddess of the rising light of day and spring, which deity, however, is otherwise unknown, even in the Edda (Simrock, Mythol., 362); Anglo-Saxon, ēaster, ēastron; Old High German, āstra, āstrara, āstrarūn; German, Ostern. April was called easter-monadh. The plural eästron is used, because the feast lasts seven days. Like the French plural Pâques, it is a translation from the Latin Festa Paschalia, the entire octave of Easter. The Greek term for Easter, pascha, has nothing in common with the verb paschein, "to suffer," although by the later symbolic writers it was connected with it; it is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew pesach (transitus, passover). The Greeks called Easter the pascha anastasimon; Good Friday the pascha staurosimon. The respective terms used by the Latins are Pascha resurrectionis and Pascha crucifixionis. In the Roman and Monastic Breviaries the feast bears the title Dominica Resurrectionis; in the Mozarabic Breviary, In Latatione Diei Pasch Resurrectionis; in the Ambrosian Breviary, In Die Sancto Paschæ. The Romance languages have adopted the Hebrew-Greek term: Latin, Pascha; Italian, Pasqua; Spanish, Pascua; French, Pâques. Also some Celtic and Teutonic nations use it: Scottish, Pask; Dutch, Paschen; The correct word in Dutch is actually Pâsen Danish, Paaske; Swedish, Pask; even in the German provinces of the Lower Rhine the people call the feast Païsen not Ostern. The word is, principally in Spain and Italy, identified with the word "solemnity" and extended to other feasts, e.g. Sp., Pascua florida, Palm Sunday; Pascua de Pentecostes, Pentecost; Pascua de la Natividad, Christmas; Pascua de Epifanía, Epiphany. In some parts of France also First Communion is called Pâques, whatever time of the year administered.

The feast

Easter is the principal feast of the ecclesiastical year. Leo I (Sermo xlvii in Exodum) calls it the greatest feast (festum festorum), and says that Christmas is celebrated only in preparation for Easter. It is the centre of the greater part of the ecclesiastical year. The order of Sundays from Septuagesima to the last Sunday after Pentecost, the feast of the Ascension, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, and all other movable feasts, from that of the Prayer of Jesus in the Garden (Tuesday after Septuagesima) to the feast of the Sacred Heart (Friday after the octave of Corpus Christi), depend upon the Easter date. Commemorating the slaying of the true Lamb of God and the Resurrection of Christ, the corner-stone upon which faith is built, it is also the oldest feast of the Christian Church, as old as Christianity, the connecting link between the Old and New Testaments. That the Apostolic Fathers do not mention it and that we first hear of it principally through the controversy of the Quartodecimans are purely accidental. The connection between the Jewish Passover and the Christian feast of Easter is real and ideal. Real, since Christ died on the first Jewish Easter Day; ideal, like the relation between type and reality, because Christ's death and Resurrection had its figures and types in the Old Law, particularly in the paschal lamb, which was eaten towards evening of the 14th of Nisan. In fact, the Jewish feast was taken over into the Christian Easter celebration; the liturgy (Exsultet) sings of
the passing of Israel through the Red Sea, the paschal lamb, the column of fire, etc. Apart, however, from the Jewish feast, the Christians would have celebrated the anniversary of the death and the Resurrection of Christ. But for such a feast it was necessary to know the exact calendar date of Christ's death. To know this day was very simple for the Jews; it was the day after the 14th of the first month, the 15th of Nisan of their calendar. But in other countries of the vast Roman Empire there were other systems of chronology. The Romans from 45 B.C. had used the reformed Julian calendar; there were also the Egyptian and the Syro-Macedonian calendar. The foundation of the Jewish calendar was the lunar year of 354 days, whilst the other systems depended on the solar year. In consequence the first days of the Jewish months and years did not coincide with any fixed days of the Roman solar year. Every fourth year of the Jewish system had an intercalary month. Since this month was inserted, not according to some scientific method or some definite rule, but arbitrarily, by command of the Sanhedrin, a distant Jewish date can never with certainty be transposed into the corresponding Julian or Gregorian date (Ideler, Chronologie, I, 570 sq.). The connection between the Jewish and the Christian Pasch explains the movable character of this feast. Easter has no fixed date, like Christmas, because the 15th of Nisan of the Semitic calendar was shifting from date to date on the Julian calendar. Since Christ, the true Paschal Lamb, had been slain on the very day when the Jews, in celebration of their Passover, immolated the figurative lamb, the Jewish Christians in the Orient followed the Jewish method, and commemorated the death of Christ on the 15th of Nisan and His Resurrection on the 17th of Nisan, no matter on what day of the week they fell. For this observance they claimed the authority of St. John and St. Philip.

In the rest of the empire another consideration predominated. Every Sunday of the year was a commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ, which had occurred on a Sunday. Because the Sunday after 14 Nisan was the historical day of the Resurrection, at Rome this Sunday became the Christian feast of Easter. Easter was celebrated in Rome and Alexandria on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, and the Roman Church claimed for this observance the authority of Sts. Peter and Paul. The spring equinox in Rome fell on 22 March. At Antioch Easter was kept on the Sunday after the Jewish Passover. (See EASTERN CONTROVERSY.) In Gaul a number of bishops, wishing to escape the difficulties of the paschal computation, seem to have assigned Easter to a fixed date of the Roman calendar, celebrating the death of Christ on 25 March, His Resurrection on 27 March (Marinus Dumiensis in P.L., LXXII, 47-51), since already in the third century 25 March was considered the day of the Crucifixion (Computus Pseudocyprianus, ed. Lersch, Chronologie, II, 61). This practice was of short duration. Many calendars in the Middle Ages contain these same dates (25 March, 27 March) for purely historical, not liturgical, reasons (Grotenfend, Zeitrechnung, II, 46, 60, 72, 106, 110, etc.). The Montanists in Asia Minor kept Easter on the Sunday after 6 April (Schmid, Osterfestberechnung in der abendländischen Kirche). The First Council of Nicaea (325) decreed that the Roman practice should be observed throughout the Church. But even at Rome the Easter term was changed repeatedly. Those who continued to keep Easter with the Jews were called Quartodecimans (14 Nisan) and were excluded from the Church. The computus paschalis, the method of determining the date of Easter and the dependent feasts, was of old considered so important that Durandus (Rit. div. off., 8, c.i.) declares a priest unworthy of the name who does not know the computus paschalis. The movable character of Easter (22 March to 25 April) gives rise to inconveniences, especially in modern times. For decades scientists and other people have worked in vain for a simplification of the computus, assigning Easter to the first Sunday in April or to the Sunday nearest the 7th of April. Some even wish to put every Sunday to a certain date of the month, e.g., beginning with New Year's always on a Sunday, etc. [See L. Günther, "Zeitschrift Weltall" (1903); Sandhage and P. Dueren in "Pastor bonus" (Trier, 1906); C. Tondini, "L'Italia e la questione del Calendario" (Florence, 1905).]

The Easter office and mass

The first Vespers of Easter are connected now with the Mass of Holy Saturday, because that Mass was formerly celebrated in the evening (see HOLY SATURDAY); they consist of only one psalm (cxi) and the Magnificat. The Matins have only one Nocturn; the Office is short, because the clergy were busy with catechumens, the reconciliation of sinners, and the distribution of alms, which were given plentifully by the rich on Easter Day. This peculiarity of reciting only one Nocturn was extended by some churches from the octave of Easter to the entire paschal time, and soon to all the feasts of the Apostles and similar high feasts of the entire ecclesiastical year. This observance is found in the German Breviaries far up into the nineteenth century ("Brev. Monaster", 1830; Baumer, "Breviary", 312). The octave of Easter ceases with None of Saturday and
on Sunday the three Nocturns with the eighteen psalms of the ordinary Sunday Office are recited. Many churches, however, during the Middle Ages and later (Brev. Monaster., 1830), on Low Sunday (Dominica in Albis) repeated the short Nocturn of Easter Week. Before the usus Romanae Curiae (Baumer, 301). was spread by the Franciscans over the entire Church the eighteen (or twenty-four) psalms of the regular Sunday Matins were, three by three, distributed over the Matins of Easter Week (Baumer, 301). This observance is still one of the peculiarities of the Carmelite Breviary. The simplified Breviary of the Roman Curia (twelfth century) established the custom of repeating Psalms i, ii, iii, every day of the octave. From the ninth to the thirteenth century in most dioceses, during the entire Easter Week the two precepts of hearing Mass and of abstaining from servile work were observed (Kellner, Heortologie, 17); later on this law was limited to two days (Monday and Tuesday), and since the end of the eighteenth century, to Monday only. In the United States even Monday is no holiday of obligation. The first three days of Easter Week are doubles of the first class, the other days semi-doubles. During this week, in the Roman Office, through immemorial custom the hymns are omitted, or rather were never inserted. The ancient ecclesiastical Office contained no hymns, and out of respect for the great solemnity of Easter and the ancient jubilus "Haec Dies", the Roman Church did not touch the old Easter Office by introducing hymns. Therefore to the present day the Office of Easter consists only of psalms, antiphons, and the great lessons of Matins. Only the "Victimae Paschali" was adopted in most of the churches and religious orders in the Second Vespers. The Mozarabic and Ambrosian Offices use the Ambrosian hymn "Hic est dies versus Dei" in Lauds and Vespers, the Monastic Breviary, "Ad coenam Agni providi" at Vespers, "Chorus novae Jerusalem" at Matins, and "Aurora Lucis rutilat" at Lauds. The Monastic Breviary has also three Nocturns on Easter Day. Besides the hymns the chapter is omitted and the Little Hours have no antiphons; the place of the hymns, chapters, and little responses is taken by the jubilus, "Haec Dies quam fecit Dominus, exultemus et laetemur ea". The Masses of Easter Week have a sequence of dramatic character, "Victimae paschali", which was composed by Wipo, a Burgundian priest at the courts of Conrad II and Henry III. The present Preface is abridged from the longer Preface of the Gregorian Sacramentary. The "Communicantes" and "Hanc igitur" contain references to the solemn baptism of Easter eve. To the "Benedicamus Domino" of Lauds and Vespers and to the "Ite Missa est" of the Mass two alleluias are added during the entire octave. Every day of the octave has a special Mass; an old manuscript Spanish missal of 855 contains three Masses for Easter Sunday; the Gallican missals have two Masses for every day of the week, one of which was celebrated at four in the morning, preceded by a procession (Migne, La Liturgie Catholique, Paris, 1863, p. 952). In the Gelasian Sacramentary every day of Easter Week has its own Preface (Probst, Sacramentarien, p. 226).

To have a correct idea of the Easter celebration and its Masses, we must remember that it was intimately connected with the solemn rite of baptism. The preparatory liturgical acts commenced on the eve and were continued during the night. When the number of persons to be baptized was great, the sacramental ceremonies and the Easter celebration were united. This connection was severed at a time when, the discipline having changed, even the recollection of the old traditions was lost. The greater part of the ceremonies was transferred to the morning hours of Holy Saturday. This change, however, did not produce a new liturgical creation adapted to the new order of things. The old baptismal ceremonies were left untouched and have now, apparently, no other reason for preservation than their antiquity. The gap left in the liturgical services after the solemnities of the night had been transferred to the morning of Holy Saturday was filled in France, Germany, and in some other countries by a twofold new ceremony, which, however, was never adopted in Rome.

First, there was the commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ. At midnight, before Matins, the clergy in silence entered the dark church and removed the cross from the sepulchre to the high altar. Then the candles were lit, the doors opened, and a solemn procession was held with the cross through the church, the cloister, or cemetery. Whilst the procession moved from the altar to the door, the beautiful old antiphon, "Cum Rex gloriae", was sung, the first part softly (humili ac depressa voce), to symbolize the sadness of the souls in limbo; from Advenisti desiderabilis the singers raised their voices in jubilation whilst the acolytes rang small bells which they carried. The full text of this antiphon, which has disappeared from the liturgy, follows:

Cum rex gloriae Christus infemum debellatus intraret, et chorus angelicus ante faciem ejus protas principum tolii praeceptor, sanctorum populus, qui tenebatur in morte captivus, voce lacrimabilim clamabat dicens: Advenisti desiderabilis, quem expectabamus in tenebris, ut educerem hac nocte vinculatos de claustris. Te nostra vocabat suspitia, te large requirebant lamenta, tu factus est spes desesperatis, magna consolatio in tormentis. Alleluia.
When the procession returned, in many churches the "Attollite portas" (Ps. xiii) was sung at the door, in order to symbolize the victorious entry of Christ into limbo and hell. After the procession Matins were sung. In later centuries the Blessed Sacrament took the place of the cross in the procession. This ceremony is, with the approval of the Holy See, still held in Germany on the eve of Easter with simpler ceremonies, in the form of a popular devotion.

Second, the visitation of the Sepulchre. After the third lesson of the Nocturnal of clerics, representing the holy women, went to the empty sepulchre, where another woman (an angel) announced to them that the Saviour was risen. The two then brought the message to the choir, whereupon two priests, impersonating Peter and John, ran to the tomb and, finding it empty, shoed to the people the linen in which the body had been wrapped. Then the choir sang the "Te Deum" and the "Victima paschali". In some churches, e.g. at Rouen, the apparition of Christ to Mary Magdalen was also represented. Out of this solemn ceremony, which dates back to the tenth century, grew the numerous Easter plays. (Nord-Amerikanisches Pastoralblatt, Oct., 1907, p. 149, has a long article on these two ceremonies.) The Easter plays in the beginning used only the words of the Gospels and the "Victima paschali"; in the course of development they became regular dramas, in Latin or vernacular versions, which contained the negotiation between the vendor of unguents and the three women, the dialogue between Pilate and the Jews asking for soldiers to guard the Sepulchre, the contest of Peter and John running to the tomb, the risen Saviour appearing to Magdalen, and the descent of Christ into hell. Towards the end of the Middle Ages the tone of these plays became worldly, and they were filled with long burlesque speeches of salve-dealers, Jews, soldiers, and demons (Creizenach, Gesch, des neun Dramas, Halle, 1893).

The procession combined with the solemn Second Vespers of Easter Sunday is very old. There was great variety in the manner of solemnizing these Vespers. The service commenced with the nine Kyrie Eleisons, sung as in the Easter Mass, even sometimes with the corresponding trope lux et origo boni. After the third psalm the whole choir went in procession to the baptismal chapel, where the fourth psalm, the "Victima paschali", and the Magnificat were sung: thence the procession moved to the great cross at the entrance to the sanctuary (choir), and from there, after the fifth psalm and the Magnificat were sung, to the empty sepulchre, where the services were concluded. The Carmelites and a number of French dioceses, e.g. Paris, Lyons, Besançon, Chartres, Laval, have, with the permission of the Holy See, retained these solemn Easter Vespers since the re-introduction of the Roman Breviary. But they are celebrated differently in every diocese, very much modernized in some churches. At Lyons the Magnificat is sung three times. In Cologne and Trier the solemn Vespers of Easter were abolished in the nineteenth century (Nord-Amerikanisches Pastoralblatt, April, 1908, p. 50). Whilst the Latin Rite admits only commemorations in Lauds, Mass, and Vespers from Wednesday in Easter Week and excludes any commemoration on the first three days of the week, the Greek and Russian Churches transfer the occurring Offices (canons) of the saints from Matins to Complin during the entire octave, even on Easter Sunday. After the Anti-pascha (Low Sunday), the canons and other canticles of Easter are continued in the entire Office up to Ascension Day, and the canons of the saints take only the second place in Matins. Also the Greeks and Russians have a solemn procession at midnight, before Matins, during which they sing at the door of the church Psalm 67, repeating after each verse the Easter antiphon. When the procession leaves, the church is dark; when it returns, hundreds of candles and coloured lamps are lit to represent the splendour of Christ's Resurrection. After Lauds all those who are present give each other the Easter kiss, not excluding even the beggar. One says: "Christ is risen"; the other answers: "He is truly risen"; and these words are the Russians' greeting during Easter. A similar custom had, through the influence of the Byzantine court, been adopted at Rome for a time. The greeting was: Surrerit Dominus vere; R. Et apparuit Simoni. (Maximilianus, Princ. Sax., Praecl. de liturg. Orient., I, 114; Martene, De antiqu. Eccl. rit., c. xxv, 5.) The Armenian Church during the entire time from Easter to Pentecost celebrates the Resurrection alone to the exclusion of all feasts of the saints. On Easter Monday they keep All Souls' Day, the Decollation of John the Baptist, and the Ascension Day, after Easter the founding of the first Christian Church on Sion and of the Church in general, the fifth Sunday the Apparition of the Holy Cross at Jerusalem, then on Thursday the Ascension of Christ, and the Sunday after the feast of the great Vision of St. Gregory. From Easter to Ascension the Armenians never fast or do they abstain from meat (C. Tondini de Quaranghi, Calendrier de la Nation Arménienne). In the Mozarab Rite of Spain, after the Pater Noster on Easter Day and during the week the priest intones the particula "Regnum" and sings "Vicit Leo de Tribu Juda radix David Alleluja". The people answer: "Qui sedes super Cherubim radix David. Alleluja". This is sung three times (Missale Mozarab.). In some cities of Spain before sunrise two processions leave the.
principal church; one with the image of Mary covered by a black veil; another with the Blessed Sacrament. The processions move on in silence until they meet at a predetermined place; then the veil is removed from the image of Mary and the clergy with the people sing the "regina Coeli" (Guéranger, Kirchenjahrg., VII, 166). For the sanctuary at Emmaus in the Holy Land the Holy See has approved a special feast on Easter Monday, "Solemnitas manifestationis D.N.I. Chr. Resurg., Titul. Eccles. dupl. I Cl.", with proper Mass and Office (Cal. Rom. Seraph. in Terrae S. Custodia, 1907).

Peculiar customs of Easter time

Risus Paschalis

This strange custom originated in Bavaria in the fifteenth century. The priest inserted in his sermon funny stories which would cause his hearers to laugh (Ostermärlein), e.g. a description of how the devil tries to keep the doors of hell locked against the descending Christ. Then the speaker would draw the moral from the story. This Easter laughter, giving rise to grave abuses of the word of God, was prohibited by Clement X (1670-1676) and in the eighteenth century by Maximilian III and the bishops of Bavaria (Wagner, De Risus Paschalli, Königsberg, 1705; Linsemeier, Predigt in Deutschland, Munich, 1886).

Easter eggs

Because the use of eggs was forbidden during Lent, they were brought to the table on Easter Day, coloured red to symbolize the Easter joy. This custom is found not only in the Latin but also in the Oriental Churches. The symbolic meaning of a new creation of mankind by Jesus risen from the dead was probably an invention of later times. The custom may have its origin in paganism, for a great many pagan customs, celebrating the return of spring, gravitated to Easter. The egg is the emblem of the gminating life of early spring. Easter eggs, the children are told, come from Rome with the bells which on Thursday go to Rome and return Saturday morning. The sponsors in some countries give Easter eggs to their god-children. Coloured eggs are used by children at Easter in a sort of game which consists in testing the strength of the shells (Kraus, Real-Encyklopædie, s.v. Ei). Both coloured and uncoloured eggs are used in some parts of the United States for this game, known as "egg-picking". Another practice is the "egg-rolling" by children on Easter Monday on the lawn of the White House in Washington.

The Easter rabbit

The Easter Rabbit lays the eggs, for which reason they are hidden in a nest or in the garden. The rabbit is a pagan symbol and has always been an emblem of fertility (Simrock, Mythologie, 551).

Handball

In France handball playing was one of the Easter amusements, found also in Germany (Simrock, op. cit., 575). The ball may represent the sun, which is believed to take three leaps in rising on Easter morning. Bishops, priests, and monks, after the strict discipline of Lent, used to play ball during Easter week (Beleth, Expl. Div. off., 120). This was called libertas Decembrica, because formerly in December, the masters used to play ball with their servants, maids, and shepherds. The ball game was connected with a dance, in which even bishops and abbots took part. At Auxerre, Besançon, etc. the dance was performed in church to the strains of the "Victimae paschali". In England, also, the game of ball was a favourite Easter sport in which the municipal corporation engaged with due parade and dignity. And at Bury St. Edmunds, within recent years, the game was kept up with great spirit by twelve old women. After the game and the dance a banquet was given, during which a homily on the feast was read. All these customs disappeared for obvious reasons (Kirchenlex., IV, 1414).

Men and women

On Easter Monday the women had a right to strike their husbands, on Tuesday the men struck their wives, as in December the servants scolded their masters. Husbands and wives did this "ut ostendant sese mutuo debere corrige, ne illo tempore alter ab altero thori debetur exigere" (Beleth, I, c. cxx; Durandus, I, c. vi, 86). In the northern parts of England the men parade the streets on Easter
Sunday and claim the privilege of lifting every woman three times from the ground, receiving in payment a kiss or a silver sixpence. The same is done by the women to the men on the next day. In the Neumark (Germany) on Easter Day the men servants whip the maid servants with switches; on Monday the maids whip the men. They secure their release with Easter eggs. These customs are probably of pre-Christian origin (Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, Das festliche Jahr, 118).

**The Easter fire**

The Easter Fire is lit on the top of mountains (Easter mountain, Osterberg) and must be kindled from new fire, drawn from wood by friction (nodfyr); this is a custom of pagan origin in vogue all over Europe, signifying the victory of spring over winter. The bishops issued severe edicts against the sacrilegious Easter fires (Conc. Germanicum, a. 742, c.v.; Council of Lestines, a. 743, n. 15), but did not succeed in abolishing them everywhere. The Church adopted the observance into the Easter ceremonies, referring it to the fiery column in the desert and to the Resurrection of Christ; the new fire on Holy Saturday is drawn from flint, symbolizing the Resurrection of the Light of the World from the tomb closed by a stone (Missale Rom.). In some places a figure was thrown into the Easter fire, symbolizing winter; but to the Christians on the Rhine, in Tyrol and Bohemia, Judas the traitor (Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, Das festliche Jahr, 112 sq.).

**Processions and awakenings**

At Puy in France, from time immemorial to the tenth century, it was customary, when at the first psalm of Matins a canon was absent from the choir, for some of the canons and vicars, taking with them the processional cross and the holy water, to go to the house of the absentee, sing the "Haec Dies", sprinkle him with water, if he was still in bed, and lead him to the church. In punishment he had to give a breakfast to his conductors. A similar custom is found in the fifteenth century at Nantes and Angers, where it was prohibited by the diocesan synods in 1431 and 1448. In some parts of Germany parents and children try to surprise each other in bed on Easter morning to apply the health-giving switches (Freyde, Ostern in deutscher Sage, Sitte und Dichtung, 1893).

**Blessing of food**

In both the Oriental and Latin Churches, it is customary to have those victuals which were prohibited during Lent blessed by the priests before eating them on Easter Day, especially meat, eggs, butter, and cheese (Ritualbucher, Paderborn, 1904; Maximilianus., Liturg. or., 117). Those who ate before the food was blessed, according to popular belief, were punished by God, sometimes instantaneously (Migne, Liturgie, s.v. Pâques).

**House blessings**

On the eve of Easter the homes are blessed (Rit. Rom., tit. 8, c. iv) in memory of the passing of the angel in Egypt and the signing of the door-posts with the blood of the paschal lamb. The parish priest visits the houses of his parish; the papal apartments are also blessed on this day. The room, however, in which the pope is found by the visiting cardinal is blessed by the pontiff himself (Moroni, Dizionaria, s.v. Pasqua).

**Sports and celebrations**

The Greeks and Russians after their long, severe Lent make Easter a day of popular sports. At Constantinople the cemetery of Pera is the noisy rendezvous of the Greeks; there are music, dances, and all the pleasures of an Oriental popular resort; the same custom prevails in the cities of Russia. In Russia anyone can enter the belfries on Easter and ring the bells, a privilege of which many persons avail themselves.

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